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ABSTRACT

Children's writings seem to elicit a somewhat narrow range of adult responses. More often than not, the adult tendency is to read children's fictional writings as autobiographical. The adult critic can, that is, think of the child author as a collection of biographical facts, a series of life experiences with an end point marked by the production of a particular text. The adult critic, however, can also think of the child author as a maker--that is, a person who thinks and has ideas, a person who shapes ideas and events in linguistic, narrative form with some consciousness of a hearer or a reader whose response is of some interest. A particular fourth-grade child's story offers a case in point. His tale of intrigue, murder, gore, cannibalism, and conspiracy and betrayal among numerous relatives elicited concern from his teacher. An experienced, generous and accomplished teacher, she found herself worrying that the child author was "disturbed," preoccupied as he apparently was with killing. The leap from distressing content in the child's writing to an assumption of distressing elements in the life of the child author is an easy one--and at times an appropriate one. However, if it is the only one or even the primary one, the teacher-critic does the child-author a disservice and he or she stands to lose a great deal as a critic and teacher. (Contains 16 notes, 23 references, and a version of the fourth-grader's story.) (TB)

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, 1994.

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"There the kid was, stranded in a car":
Dilemmas of Teacher Responsiveness in a Writing Workshop[1]

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As this is written, the world is full of the clang of contending armies.
--John Dewey, *Democracy & Education* (1916/1964, p. 146).

Children's writings seem to elicit a somewhat narrow range of adult responses. Sometimes we are charmed, though perhaps not deeply or memorably. Sometimes we are dismayed. (I have now a handful of students whose writing seems in perpetual homage to "Mortal Kombat." I am often, in fact, appalled.) Sometimes we are concerned about the mechanics of the writing--spelling and punctuation, more ambitiously, syntax, and so on. To the extent that "writing process" or "writing workshop" and other approaches which stress young writers' capacities as *generators* of ideas, topics, themes, and poetry and prose in the service of the writer's interests, questions, and preoccupations are popular,[2] we're encouraged to be, at the very least, surprised and often pleased by children's writings. These kinds of approach also help us to appreciate the linked development of technical command and substantive concerns, and to remember that "real writing" exists, by and large, in context of some actual, hoped for, or possible *audience*. But there remains, I think, a strong tendency

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1 The work in this paper has been supported in part by the Michigan Partnership for a New Education and the Department of Teacher Education, College of Education, Michigan State University. The opinions expressed are my own.

I would also like to gratefully acknowledge Deborah Ball, Alyjah Byrd, Lauren Pfeiffer, and Sylvia Rundquist for their helpful comments on the ideas and work represented in this paper.

And, of course, my thanks to Brendan and his family for permission to discuss his work here.

2 Lucy Calkins' *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1986) is perhaps the most widely read exposition of "the writing workshop" approach, though her more recent, more wide ranging book, *Living Between the Lines* (1991), may prove yet more popular and influential. Donald Graves (1983, for example) is another central figure in this line of work. Others who have drawn our attention to the possibilities inherent in stressing students' capacities as producers of worthwhile texts include Glenda Bissex (, 1980), Kenneth Koch (1970/1971); (1973/1974), the work of Teachers and Writers Collaborative and, with respect to older students, Mike Rose (1989, for example) and Peter Elbow (1986, for example). The list is of course incomplete, and the sensibilities quite different. The larger tradition with which I associate these writers, to varying degrees, is the progressive emphasis on humans as active shapers of experience and authors of inquiry. Seminal figures in this tradition include, for me, Dewey speaking of the need for an education addressed to "our impulses and tendencies to make, to do, to create, to produce" (Dewey, 1900/1956; also see *Art as Experience* [1934]) and, more recently, the work of Patricia Carini and other colleagues of mine at the Prospect School (see, for example, Carini's discussion of children as "makers of works" (Carini, in Himley [1991], a work which also draws heavily on Bakhtin). The *import* of all these authors, but not necessarily the uses to which they are put, takes us beyond "surprise and pleasure."

to read children's writings, insofar as content is concerned, in rather literal, autobiographical ways, especially when the content is distressing--as if the writing gives us a somewhat cryptic but still pretty direct avenue--a sort of window--into the facts of the author's life. I have noticed this with undergraduates studying to become teachers and I have noticed it with experienced teachers--and even with parents who are bemused and a bit embarrassed by, for example, the quantity of blood and violence in a child's writing. And, certainly, teachers have a responsibility to consider whether a child who writes, for example, about child abuse, is representing first hand, actual experience.

But it is also the case that children very typically choose to write *stories*. Moreover, they demonstrate by the formal, narrative conventions they employ, and often by their diction and tone, that they are well aware of operating in the realm of fiction[3]--a place where tales are *made* and the facts of the world are not merely recorded. They also demonstrate, in their response to stories, asking things like, "but *is it true?* did Hercules *really* exist?"--a type of question that, in my experience, will persist well into the elementary school years if it is not regularly met with disdainful correction or outright derision--that the boundaries between fact and invention are tenuous and often not well marked.[4] There is certainly little reason to imagine that the recognition that there are truths in addition to factual ones, and that a story, as a made thing, can be an invention that nonetheless incorporates *real* experiences, *versions* of real experiences, and realistic or *plausible* experiences, not only as well as but maybe more typically than outright fantastic experiences, is the exclusive privilege of adult readers. Children recognize these things too, in practice and sometimes in explicit statement. The fictional part of story craft lies much more in the employment of language and form which seduce our attention, and the knitting together of incident in ways that stimulate, provoke, and ultimately please by their resolution (or by the significant character of their irresolution), than in the inventiveness spent on the discrete elements of the plot. In many traditional forms of fiction--including much that is up to the minute (the work of Georges Perec [1975/1988; 1978/1987], makes a nice example)--one source of our pleasure as readers lies in the ways in which we remember and are reminded, and allow ourselves and are allowed to half forget, that we are in the presence of invention. If we had *all* awareness or *all* forgetfulness of the

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3 The Latin root according to Partridge means "to model in clay," from which follows, "to fashion or form, and finally to invent, imagine..." (1966/1983).

4 See, for example, Jerome Bruner's ruminations on narrative in *Acts of Meaning*, e.g., "Given the specialization of ordinary languages in establishing binary contrasts, why do none impose a once-for-all, sharp grammatical or lexical distinction between true stories and imaginative ones?" and the suggestion that "truth and possibility are inextricable in narrative" (1990, pp. 52 & 53).

made--fictional--nature of the story, the pleasure and sense of emancipation mingled with concern which a good story provides would be much diminished.

But as teachers, when we read children's stories, we often seem to forget about this co-mingling and to assume an overly reductive attitude towards the text, as if it is both a good deal less straightforward--treating it as an encoded version of the writer's "real life"--and a good deal more straightforward--treating it as if the possibility of combining the actual, the possible, and the strictly fantastic had never occurred to the child--than it is. By limiting our attention to essentially autobiographical readings of children's writings--and, equally, by virtually ignoring their content, attending only to low level issues of form, and to process--we not only do a certain injustice to children's intelligence, we also sharply reduce our own capacities to be instructed, challenged, enlightened, or chastened by the texts.[5] And if, in our critical assumptions, we understand literary meaning to be a kind of transaction between author and reader,[6] mediated by a text which is dependent--unequally, to be sure--on both parties, we are then diminishing the child-author's meaning-making capacity when we make these more narrow and unresponsive, "autobiographical," readings.

Pedagogically speaking, it is hardly clear that what I'm calling "autobiographical" readings are the most fertile in any case (always allowing for the possibility, which certainly happens, that a child-author *is* "sending a message" calling for direct, practical response). We can, that is, think of the author as a collection of biographical facts, a series of life experiences with an end point marked (for the reader's purposes, though not the teacher's) by production of a particular text. We can also think of the author as a *maker*--that is, a person who thinks and has ideas (sees possibilities and meanings), a person who shapes ideas and events in linguistic, narrative, form with some consciousness of a hearer or a reader whose response is of some interest. From the latter point of view (which, again, of course does not exclude the former), we gain access to the idea of craftsmanship[7] as something which may be open to teacherly intervention and support, and content as something which may be susceptible to teacherly thought and productive of teacherly imagination. (Of course, "teacher" in these instances can be replaced or joined by "colleague," "classmate," "peer.") In

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5 For a powerful instance of readings which *do* take account of the fictive content of children's' writings and the indeterminate, often unsettling position in which they may place teacher-readers, see Lensmire's *Intention, Risk, and Writing in a Fourth Grade Writing Workshop* (1991).

6 Hardly a novel formulation at this point. To take two of many possible forms of this idea, neither of them extreme: The State of Michigan defines reading as "the process of constructing meaning through dynamic interaction among the reader, the text, and the context of the reading situation" (Michigan, 1986 [?]); Scholes observes that "the price of entry [to a text] is the labor of production itself. To read rightly we must start to write ourselves. We shall have to add something to this text in order to read it" (1989, p. 5).

7 I don't know how to make this word gender neutral nor know of an adequate substitute.

stressing the possibility that a child's writing may be productive of thought for a teacher, and of genuine "literary" interest to a teacher, I am not, I think, indulging in a sentimental egalitarianism: I am Romantic, if that is the word, enough to believe that no generation of adults has reached an acme of knowledge and understanding such that we can reasonably and responsibly suppose that the duty of children is first to master all that "we" know before getting around to knowing anything for themselves; I am sufficiently committed to the idea of inquiry and the possibility of being educated that I think it is reasonable and appropriate for teachers and students *both* to approach the world as learners; but I am working on flatter ground here. I am trying to take seriously the idea that literary meaning is a product of the encounter between reader and text, an encounter made possible by, but not guaranteed by, the author. If this is so, and if part of our job as teachers is, one, to help children make meaning, and, two, more narrowly, to help them be literate, then it seems sensible to explore deliberately our roles as readers of children's texts. I try here to make a case for and to do a bit of such exploration.

* * *

> There the kid was stranded in a car with a dead guy on the driver's seat. The kid moved the guy in the back seat and tried to drive the car first he went backward then he went forward and there was blood all over the windshield the kid put on the windshield wipers and said "I killed 2 guys!" the kid yelled he didn't know how to drive. the car was a Lamborghini so he went as fast as the car could go he got there in 6 hours.[8]

Brendan[9] was a student in my fourth grade "writing workshop" several years ago when he wrote these lines. The blood on the windshield, so thick and greasy it requires wipers--conjuring up a vivid cinematic moment, though no particular movie comes to my mind--strikes me as capturing in an image not only the recurrent violence of this story but the degree to which the protagonist virtually helplessly *must* see the world through a bloodied haze; while the passage as a whole captures the sense of being at all times in danger of being out of control: the world as full of

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[8] Child-writings are reproduced essentially as they appeared in one version or another. From time to time I have made silent changes in punctuation or spelling to better replicate "Brendan's" speaking voice or to help the reader focus on the meaning but, as almost all work quoted here went through a lengthy process of revision, these changes are few. A complete unedited typescript of this story is attached.

[9] A pseudonym.

anarchic force.[10] There is to my ear a pronounced writerly sensibility at work here as well, as evidenced by the poetic rhythm of the first quoted line (which scans moderately well in dactylic meter):

> Thére the kid was
> stránded in a car
> with a déad guy
> on the dríver's seat.

The ambiguity of punctuation in the entire passage can even be seen to increase its poetic sense. Finally, the specification of *six* hours is characteristic of the piece as a whole. The first, perhaps most lasting, impression most readers take away remains that of bloodiness and confusion. What is not evident in the passage itself, but is very much part of the story I want to tell, is that these lines also represent a long, even arduous, process of revision.

I was a guest in Brendan's classroom, teaching three to five hours a week in the context of a several year collaboration with Alyjah Byrd, my host teacher in a Professional Development School. The population as a whole was multi-ethnic, multi-national, and moderately diverse socio-economically. The workshop structure was simple: The first session of the week usually began with a meeting involving discussion often followed by an assignment--for instance, over the first several weeks, there was discussion about "where ideas for writing come from," a series of exercises in description of natural objects, and a group description (oral and written) of a period photograph. On rare occasions, I made individual assignments. The bulk of the writing time was devoted to "choice writing," during which students were responsible for generating themes and forms on their own or in collaboration with peers. I met with individual students for conferences irregularly. Each week I also provided a "back up assignment"--a theme, opening sentence, or direction "for people having trouble coming up with ideas." At least one, and usually more, sessions each week ended with a twenty minute meeting for "sharing work." Alyjah Byrd and I also met each week to discuss individual students, the workshop, "writing across the curriculum," and other topics of mutual interest. The year in which the writings I consider here were produced was the one in which Jeffrey Dahmer achieved notoriety for cannibalism, the year in which Mike Tyson went on trial for rape, the year after the Persian Gulf war--events which all made their way into the children's writings and discussion of each other's writings.

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[10] At the risk of cliché, I find it hard not to be reminded of Yeats' lines in "The Second Coming" (written, like *Democracy & Education*, in about 1916): "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,/The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/The ceremony of innocence is drowned..." (1921/1956).

From October to March, Brendan worked intermittently--in bursts of concentration, leavened by work on workshop assignments and on other pieces of his own choosing--on the story from which I've just quoted, "The Garbage Can Seller." The story first came to my attention when "silliness," in the form of raucous giggles, broke out at Brendan's table. The flush on his face when I glanced over, and the way others looked from him to me to their pages and back, suggested that he had somehow provided the occasion for the outbreak. It was mid-October, early in our work together: the students were unsure about my expectations and the extent of their opportunities, particularly in regard to "choice writing"; I was intent on establishing an atmosphere of some seriousness and on communicating my watchfulness and interest. Looking over Brendan's shoulder, I read:

> Once upon a time in a very small small store there was 13 garbage cans. The man that owns it is poor, he lives in a small box. He is rich compared to his friends, he has a wicked step brother that is rich: *he* owns a store that sells everything, even boxes...

Continuing, I learned that the poor man, later identified as Henry, had bought, at the rich step-brother's store, "a can of beans and 2 boxes of cheese." These lines, it seemed, had led irresistibly to thoughts of flatulence and thus to giggles. Without much deliberation, I urged Brendan to continue writing, enjoining everyone to "seriousness" and "concentration," trying to address my commentary to the behavior surrounding the writing and not to the text itself. Looking back on my journal, I can see that I had doubts, over the next several weeks, about the future of this story, which quickly grew violent as first Henry's house was destroyed, and then he and his wife were "slaughtered." Brendan kept working on it, though, and was eager to read what he had to the group at sharing time. In early November, he did.

Henry's wife, it transpired, had given birth to a baby an hour after she died. At fourteen that baby--now, "the kid"--goes to the police "to find out who killed his mother and father," only to discover his next-door neighbor is the murderer. When he returns, he finds the neighbor "dead on the floor." Standing over him is the boy's grandfather--apparently they are meeting each other for the first time--who is also the father of the dead "bad guy." Again, the writing was greeted noisily and with what I took to be nervous laughter. Brendan himself was not composed as he read. Instructing him that his job was to "read so that we can pay attention," admonishing the others for "silliness that's not helpful to the person who is sharing or the people trying to listen," I pressed him to keep going. The brief discussion that followed focused to some extent on the question of *why* the bad brother killed "the kid's"

father--"I told you, he was jealous," the grandfather explains--but most questions turned on the difficulty people had keeping the characters and their familial relationships straight.

Indeed it was difficult to keep track of the characters, especially as they were mostly unnamed, related by blood or marriage, and embedded in a densely eventful story spanning several generations. Increasing "goriness" also was notable--corpses continued to multiply--as were the motif of poverty, the recurrent orphaning of the central character, and Brendan's frequent use of number--costs, earnings, and time regularly being quantified. I did not at the time formulate an idea which later seemed very apparent, that on one level the story (at least in this version) is a classic tale of the search for one's origins, a search which--as, for example, in the myth of Theseus--is often accompanied by psychic and bodily risk. (Not only have "the kid's" parents been murdered before he was born, but the evil-doer is a member of the family--Biblical references to brothers come to mind here, as do certain fairy tales--nor is the threat over. In good detective story fashion, the hero's search apparently endangers not just himself but others: his grandfather is the next to be murdered.) If this reading makes sense, it is worth remembering that the outcome of such a search is typically the formation of an identity that is on the one hand historically conscious, even tragic, and on the other, self-created. (We do not need to burden Brendan with a conscious analytical understanding of his story in these terms to regard him as working with such themes and possibilities,[11] any more than we need expect a young man's reading of Hamlet to be the same as that of maturity, or the anonymous tellers of "Rapunzel" to understand their story as Bruno Bettleheim or Anne Sexton came to understand it.)

Early on in Brendan's work on "The Garbage Can Seller," I found myself speculating about my decisions--spontaneous perhaps, they nonetheless were decisions--to encourage Brendan to stick with this story, or at least, not to discourage it. It is not that, at the early stages, he *needed* my encouragement, (though I think later on my close work with him probably helped to sustain his investment); it is just that I had doubts about the "seriousness" and potential of the piece, at a time when I was working hard to establish a serious atmosphere for the workshop. (As a guest teacher, initiating a situation characterized by some ambiguity as to my expectations--non-specific for the most part, seldom quantified, not subject to grading, but present and developing--and their freedom of self-direction--considerable, but not boundless; equally articulable, I hoped, as responsibility--it was important to me to substantiate the idea that this was "real work.") It is not that difficult to express disapproval. This

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[11] Though I can't help recalling that once when the class was speculating about the origins of language, Brendan suggested that it had been invented by children (a possibility that Lewis Thomas, for one, finds worthy of consideration) (1990, p. 95, for example).

can be readily done without being explicit, through tone, look, or re-direction--even when students nominally have "choice" as to theme. Generally, in any case, students seem to understand very well the tacit limitations on their freedom of expression in school. My suspicion was that some teachers (including myself at other times) might have found ways to divert Brendan from this content; additionally, I wondered, if that supposition were correct, how he surmised that perhaps the boundaries on acceptable content in *this* situation were not what they sometimes were in school. I became the more intrigued by these questions when it occurred to me that the somewhat exaggerated, somewhat uncomfortable laughter of Brendan's classmates may have been prompted less by, for instance, the beans and cheese, than by an appreciation of the "anarchic" strain in the plot. ("Silliness," as the word is used in elementary schools, can after all be understood to mean a kind of anarchy--hence the discomfort, and constrained vocabulary, it evokes in adults.) These speculations are unconfirmable--but experience and attentiveness may lead us to acknowledge that the compass of children's thoughts and the complexity and nuance of their expressiveness is far greater than we often recognize in practice.

In any case, I did not discourage Brendan, and soon came to find myself enthusiastic about the concentration and care he was investing in the project, and curious as to how it would develop, both in craft terms--it soon became clear that it was in a seemingly endless process of revision as well as extension--and in substance. For a while, I tried to persuade him to work with me on a genealogy of the characters. He put up with this good humoredly and indeed began to name the characters and otherwise make it a bit easier to distinguish them. The genealogy has often seemed to me since then a quixotic, wrong-headed move, completely missing the force of the story. I now see it as my attempt to bring order to a chaotic ("anarchic") situation: a wrong-headed imposition, probably, but still an understandable teacherly response.

However, Brendan's story grew ever more extravagant in the violence of its imagery. The introduction gave us the garbage can seller, living in a box, going to buy groceries from his wicked step-brother, for his wife, returning to find his house vandalized, and then being murdered by an unspecified "they." His wife is also murdered, though she manages to give birth, posthumously,[12] to a baby boy. We move forward in time to a reasonably good age for coming of age, fourteen, at which point the boy seeks those responsible for his parents' murder. It turns out he has been living next door to the murderer, over whose corpse he meets his grandfather, who explains that the dead bad guy--the boy's uncle--had killed the boy's father out of jealousy. The "old man" invites the boy to live with him; however, en-route to his

12 In the version Brendan was reading to us in November.

house, in the middle of explaining that indeed, he had killed the uncle, on account of his membership in "the mob," the grandfather is himself killed, by the mob. It is as at this point that the boy finds himself "stranded in car with a dead guy on the driver's seat." In the final chapter, the grandfather's corpse (and car) is stolen, and the police and the boy go in search of "the mob's hide out":

> And when they did find it they peeked in and saw the mob having a feast. The police man said "they're *eatin* em!" and the boy said "no they're not stupid, he's over there," he was tied to a wood cutter. The police man said "it don't matter he's dead," the police man pulled out his walkie-talkie and was gunna call the other police men. The boy snatched it away and called in backup. They got there in an hour and crashed the party. Some police men got killed and some didn't but they got the mob. And locked them up for 2,240 years without bail or parole.
>
> **The End**

My notion that there is some humor here--in, say, the phrase "crashing the party"--is not, as far as I can tell, typical. Perhaps it is aberrant. Far more typical, I believe, is the reaction of a colleague--an experienced, generous, and accomplished teacher--who found herself worrying that the child-author was "disturbed," dismayingly preoccupied with fire, poverty, and, above all, "killing." The leap from distressing content in the child's writing to an assumption that there is equivalent distressing content in the personal facts of the child's life is an easy one, perhaps a habitual one for many of us in our responsibilities as teachers. (And from there, it is all too easy to embark upon more wide-ranging speculations about the socio-economic circumstances of children's lives and to indulge all manner of cultural stereotypes.) But, though our responsibilities may certainly include asking ourselves if our students' writings are telling us something literal about their lives of which we should be aware, we will often be missing the main point if we make the search for autobiographical fact or connection our only or even our primary response. We would do well, I believe, to look to the world we share with the writer, to consider whether in some sense it is *public* experience at least as much as private experience which is being engaged and displayed--and, if there is a responsive audience, created--by the writing. We can stand, I think, to expose ourselves to the possibility that the child's text is telling us something about *our* world as well as his or hers. This, after all, is what more than one scholar regards as an essential part of reading. Robert Scholes (1989), for example, comments that

> Reading is not just a matter of standing safely outside texts, where their power cannot reach us. It is a matter of entering, of passing through the looking glass and seeing ourselves on the other side. (p. 27)

If we do not allow ourselves to be implicated by the text, if we don't allow ourselves to be, as it has become fashionable to put it, *written* by the texts we read, we limit our ability to understand and to recognize--and surely we limit our ability to educate, if that means, at least in part, to draw out the child's powers of observation and thought.

Nothing of Brendan's school life outside of these writings, in any case, gave any reason at all for entertaining the kinds of dire worries they elicit from some. On the other hand, turning from the *content* of the writing to Brendan *as the writer*, what was evident over the course of his work on "The Garbage Can Seller" and other pieces, was, let us say, the discipline and gentleness of the writer as a student, as opposed to the disorder and violence of the events written--and his growth in writerly skill (technically and substantively), his increasing self-confidence, and some degree of self-conscious exploration of the possibilities and preoccupations of grown-up life.

Consider these other facts about Brendan as a writer:

• He completed, for a display of workshop writings in December, an entirely different revision of "The Garbage Can Seller," beginning "Once upon a time in Chicago 1947, on the very poor side of town there was a little store owned by a man named Joey Wilcox." In this version he is in far greater command of the strategy of providing up-front those details of personnel, setting, and atmosphere which will enable the reader to follow the story line. He also continues to explore the pleasures of literary diction, referring at one point to "ruthless bandits," and at another declaiming that "the Fire Engines rolled in like 1,000 horses running through the wild west." Most interestingly of all, he explores a whole other strategy--one popular with his peers, too--of beginning the story as a dream, one which may or may not turn out to be real. Ultimately, he decided to combine this version with his final revision of the first attempt, creating a somewhat unwieldy story in which some of the same events are depicted in different times and with different families. (It is this version, the final one, which is appended.)

• For a class assignment in the spring--everyone was to write a fable for a class book--he produced the following:

THE MORAL IS PAY YOUR TAXES OR ELSE

Once upon a time in Kansas there was a family that lived in a old beat up barn. It was March tax season. One day early in the morning the tax man came to collect the taxes. He said "I have come to collect your taxes. The

father said "I'm sorry we don't have the money please give us another week. So the man said "Okay just one more week. So he hopped on his horse and rode off. So Monday rolled around and the tax man came back, he said "DO YOU HAVE THE MONEY?" The father said "No." So the tax man grabbed the mother and tied her to a barrel and took a ax to her head and made the whole family watch.

This was going on for years and years the tax man had given them weeks and weeks and weeks it was the same thing every year.

So finally it came to the teenage boy the last of the family living.

So they tied him up to a barrel and chopped his head off but he was still alive and he was laughing. They dug a hole threw the body in and then the head after it.

A number of things seem to me to be noteworthy about this as a piece of prose. In the first place, it is markedly concise and economical, moving swiftly to its conclusion. Setting and characters (if that is the word: "archetypes" might be more apt) are quickly established, with just enough time consuming detail to create for the reader the experience of moving from the ordinary to the horrific. The language is simple, but artful, demonstrating again the author's pleasure in literary diction (e.g., "Monday rolled around"). The rhythm is sure and compelling, poetic at moments. Structurally, the narrative begins in a classic way (while yet locating us in the mythic mid-America of, say, "The Wizard of Oz," not the same as the far off land of fairy tales). Our expectations of a conventional resolution are raised only to be confounded, however. And this happens twice: We may hope that "the teenage boy, the last of the family living," will put a stop to the killing, restore order and decency, but he does not; then we may hope for at least a sort of moral triumph, as might be achieved if the story ended with the image of the boy laughing--but we're not permitted that either. The story ends bleakly, with a thunk. This is effective fiction by any formal criteria I can think of. As for the substantive content, the fable stands, I think, as an accomplished rendering of all of the themes--poverty, family dismemberment and the orphaning of the only son, extreme and irrational violence--which stand out most sharply in the more laborious work of "The Garbage Can Seller."[13]

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[13] "The Moral Is...," which was written very rapidly, is thus the final, more successful, revision of the earlier pieces, a procedure well-recognized by writers. See, for example, Elizabeth Bishop: "I think everyone feels that his or her best poems were lucky accidents...But of course they really aren't at all--they are indications that you have worked hard on all the others, and felt deeply, and somehow managed to create the right atmosphere in your own brain for a good poem to emerge" (1994, p. 86, letter to May Swenson).

- Finally, in his year-end self evaluation, Brendan writes:

> 1.) I think i am a good writer. I really want to write like Stephan King when i grow up.
>
> 2. I think Writing Work Shop has helped me with my working abilities and has kind of been icouriging me to do better in school.
>
> 3. I think the kinds of books i like to wright are books about homeless people to help them get off the streets and adventures, funny books, scary books.
>
> 4. Adventures, scary, and funny books interest me. because i like them.
>
> 5. i need to work on punchuaction.
>
> 6. My imagination helps me write.
>
> 7. Punchuaction and people not under standing my writings get in my way.

Brendan's sense of accomplishment and growth, as a writer and a student, was shared by both his current and his previous year's teacher, as well as by me. More significantly for my purposes here, it is evident that he is thinking of himself *as* a writer of fiction--as someone who purposefully makes stories reflective of concerns and interests he has, who can select among genres, who associates his activity as a writer with that of "real writers" and with issues that matter to him as an inhabitant of society. Certainly he is "expressing himself"--but largely through the quality of his perceptions, concerns, pleasures and craftsmanship. It seems far more appropriate to regard him as a linguistically alert thinker in the process of growing up as a citizen than as a mere subject of experience, at worst, a victim.

* * *

I began this account with several concerns in mind. One was a question about useful ways to conceive of the teacher's role in responding to children's writings; another was a wish to portray Brendan's writing--and by extension, other children's writing--as instances of thought in action. I have proposed that a common teacherly response to the content of children's writing, especially when that content is distressing, is to see it as in some sense "autobiographical"--for which I have provided modest evidence, counting also on readers to test the proposition against their own

experience. I have tried to demonstrate that a somewhat different "reading" of Brendan's work is possible and useful--a kind of reading which it seems to me conforms to much of how we have come to understand mature readings in general, one which is aided--paradoxical though it may seem--by close attention to formal elements in the work. The reading I envision implicates the reader in the text and in the world the text may illuminate, locating author and reader as being able to participate jointly in a public space created by complementary experience, shared conventions and shared predilections for narrative,[14] and common language. And, not forgetting that we are teachers, it gives us Brendan as a student who shows himself able to pursue an idea and a project over many months, to take responsibility for an interest, to shape language effectively and to develop appropriate self-consciousness in the process.[15] It seems to me that a reading attentive to substance in these ways, as shaped by the writer, and which takes account of these kinds of elements in its making may not only be more just--more responsive to the purposes and powers of fiction to criticize and to celebrate, to imitate and to transcend--but may also be more pedagogically useful, in the access it provides to the child's capacity for making meaning and exerting discipline over time.

It could also be said that my two concerns find themselves united in a conception of the child as a thinker and the teacher as a thinking reader. I am not so bold as to define "thinking." But I identify several features of what I mean by thinking to clarify my point. I mean that thinking entails memory and anticipation, musing and selection; it entertains the possible as well as the actual: it necessarily transcends present time and solitary self. Story-telling--the activity of Brendan's with which we have been concerned--is not only not possible without thinking, it is itself a model of thought. As Harold Rosen says, we should take "narrative itself as a cognitive resource--a meaning-making strategy" (1982, April, p. 10). To generate a story, it is necessary to encompass a world of beings and possibilities beyond oneself; to apprehend a story, as a reader, requires participating in the possibilities it creates, perhaps recognizing them as our own possibilities. Speaking of thinking, which he also describes as entailing "risk," Dewey (1916/1964) asserts:

> Reflection...implies concern with the issue--a certain sympathetic identification of our own destiny, if only dramatic, with the outcome of the course of events.... From this dependence of the act of thinking upon

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[14] On "the human propensity for story," again see Bruner (1990, p. 68, for example; also, 1985), Harold Rosen (1982, April).

[15] Ideas which, with the possible exception of the last, seem to me in keeping with the integrated, non-dichotomous, morally charged views of human effort and intellect urged on us by Dewey in, for example, "Interest and Discipline" and "The Nature of Method" (Dewey, 1916/1964, chapters 10 & 13).

> a sense of sharing in the consequences of what goes on flows one of the chief paradoxes of thought. Born in partiality, in order to accomplish its tasks it must achieve a certain detached impartiality. (pp. 148 & 147)

Dewey did not exactly have narrative fiction in mind as he wrote (though a few decades later he might have); nonetheless, his words capture well the relationship of craftsmanship and technique to inspiration and investment in content in writing. Only when the writing achieves the status of an object can the writer shape and craft it at will, judge its effectiveness, and listen to its potential--only then, committed and detached, can the writer produce fiction. This I believe Brendan did. For our purposes, though, Dewey's words apply as much to the *reader* as to the writer: if we, as teachers and readers cannot make "a certain sympathetic identification of our own destiny" with the material engaged by the student-writer, we are not, by this account, able to think about it at all. We must, to put it bluntly and over simply, suppose that the worries about mayhem and the prospects of effective moral action which Brendan's stories engage are, or could be, or should be, *our* worries, that it is the possibilities of *our* world he shapes, edits, and dramatizes in fiction.

* * *

I offer one final episode in hopes of illustrating and clarifying what it might mean to think about Brendan's writing with "sympathy," that is, as if not only his characters' but other people's predicaments were implicated in it. "The Moral of the Story Is Pay Your Taxes or Else," was, as I've said, a response to an assignment: everyone in the group had to write "a fable," which, we had decided, is a particular kind of story with a moral or a lesson. It is possible of course that the entire lesson of Brendan's fable is given by the title, but that would be an inartistic procedure. Far more artistic--by which, again, I do not mean to imply, conscious, available to articulate explication by the author--and more characteristic of a writer concerned with homelessness who, in acute and uneasy, ungentle, humor, titles a work "The Garbage Can Seller"--would be the generation of a productive, thought-provoking tension between title and text. As some of Brendan's classmates said in the introduction to our Fable Book,

> There can be more than one moral in a fable. For example, there can be a written moral for your story or fable, and the reader can still make up another moral. Sometimes a moral is the solution of the fable. But sometimes a moral might not be a solution--for example, if a fable has a sad ending to the story, the moral might not be a solution.

Another part of the Fable Book assignment was that each fable would be accompanied by a drawing--not made, however, by the author, but by a reader, a classmate. This part of the assignment, then, was, at least germinally, an exercise in interpretation. The boy who illustrated Brendan's fable certainly did not provide a "solution" as the word is ordinarily understood, but it is arguable that he provided another moral. He depicted, crudely but very clearly, a crucifixion.[16] As a teacher, I found this startling, perhaps because I had not had much more than superficial faith that the drawings *would* be recognizable as interpretations (not "mere" illustrations) of the fables; also, because I was immediately certain that this particular image was not suitable for publication in a school representing an unusual range of religious beliefs, in which all reference to religion was frowned upon. But as a reader, I was startled by the insight. Granting that a crucifixion is a situation in which someone is killed, in no other way was this a *literal* illustration of the fable. Symbolically, though, a crucifixion is, I imagine, a representation of innocent suffering (among many other possibilities, of course, depending on the context in which the image is invoked). On this level, Brendan's classmate had surely interpreted the story: he had made a statement about its meaning not explicitly given by the text. Like any good interpretation, this drawing has the power to make other readers reconsider the text. I, for example, can not now read "The Moral Is..." without connecting the gory dismemberment and death of the family and, in particular, of "the teenage boy the last of the family living," to other instances of innocent suffering and sacrifice potentially redeemable in the consciousness of those who witness, survive, or come after. We can say that an interpretation creates a kind of community around the text--in this case, for instance, I now recognized Brendan's classmate and myself as participating jointly in an arena of meaning created by Brendan's fable and our reaction to it. It seemed to me, also, that this boy, in drawing the crucifixion, had intuitively apprehended something crucial to Brendan's fable with a speed and a sureness that spoke of a commonality of perception and understanding between the two, a commonality that awaited an occasion of recognition. That is to say, I suppose that, despite various obvious differences between them--for instance, race, first language, and preferred subject matters in writing--their experience of the world had important similarities, such that when mediated by Brendan's fable, the connections leapt to the fore, silently.

Speaking with wonderment and pleasure of the common English names of certain wildlife, and in particular of "the poising of heterogeneous images" in designations

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[16] A response which I ultimately discouraged, and would have outright forbidden if suggestion had not worked, on the grounds that there was a good chance it would cause offense.

like "Leather Star' and "Volcano Barnacle," Adrienne Rich, in her new book of meditations on poetry and politics, *What is Found There* (1993), says,

> Human eyes gazed at each of all these forms of life and saw resemblance in difference--the core of metaphor, that which lies close to the core of poetry, the only hope for a humane civil life. (pp. 3-4)

The perception of "resemblance in difference" *is*, many of us would agree, "the only hope for a humane civil life." The meanings of "Kansas" in American culture--"The Wizard of Oz?" Lizzie Borden? "Amber waves of grain?"--the Jeffrey Dahmer story, the Christ story, homelessness, gangster movies of the 30's and 40's, money and the lack of money, the classic fairy tale invitation to give oneself over to the pleasures of story--"once upon a time..."--the existence of groups called "families," in which it is the ordinary fate of the young to survive the death or disappearance of their elders, and to see their protective capacities diminish, the idea of a fable as a story which teaches, the perception of violence as shocking, but also perhaps pleasurable, to an audience--and, certainly, more--came together, are brought together--a "text," after all, is a weaving, a made object with *texture*, with depth and dimension, contrast, shadow, to be passed through the fingers repeatedly--in the musings of nine year old boy and certain readers of his writing. I don't want to heap too much on it--"it's only a story," after all. But a story is, as Harold Rosen insists, *an act of thought*, and a story that is remembered takes up residence in the thoughts and feelings of others--it has no life if it is not so taken up--and a story worth its salt becomes a communal meditation on the feelings and perceptions and apprehensions we delight in having and fear to have and must have if we are to live in the world as sentient beings. And if we are not sentient, we shall lose both the objects of our thought and our capacity for thought itself, and certainly render ourselves incapable of perceiving "the resemblance in difference" which we require to perceive. What Brendan gives is a chance to take another look at how the world announces itself in our time, and an occasion to ask ourselves, what is our duty as teachers in a world that looks like *this*? The meaning of the question is indeed quite different if we suppose the world we are peering at is the relatively narrow and private one of Brendan's autobiography or a larger, indeterminate one in which we all figure as players.

Appendix:

Brendan's final version of "The Garbage Can Seller," March.

part 1. the garbage can seller

Once upon a time in a very small take out store there was a man selling garbage cans. The man that owns it is poor. He lives in a small box. He is rich compared to his friends. He has a wicked step brother that is rich. He owns a store that sell's everything, even boxes. That's where henry got his box. It cost $5.99. He could afford it because he owns a business. He has no employees because he is very poor. One day he went to his brothers store to buy some thing for his wife. He had no money until he got his half time job at McDonalds. His pay is $4.69 an hour. He worked a week so he has 25.99. He bought a can of beans and 2 boxes of cheese. He went home and when he got there it was all wrecked and on the side of the box it said, "your mean brother ha ha ha!" He dropped his groceries and ran to his shop and it said the same. He ran to his brothers store to get him back but, when he got there they got him instead.

Henry got slaughtered and his wife got killed. Before Henry's wife died she delivered a baby.

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chapter 2

14 year's later their son was fourteen and he went to the police office to find out who killed his mother and father. He lived with his relatives. It was his mother's sister and her husband. When he got to the police station they gave him the files. It was a small mug shot. The boy said "this is my next door neighbor!" 18 hour's later after asking lots of questions the police followed him home. They went in to the neighbor's house and found him dead on the floor the boy yelled, "grand-pa!" The boy said "are you the dead man's dad?" The old man said "yes." The boy asked "why did the dead man kill my dad?" The old man said, "because he was jealous. He had no friends and your dad was married." Then the boy asked, "why did he kill my dad?" The man said, "I told you he was jealous!" So, the old man said "come on let's go to my house you can live there. Thank you Margerie." the old man was talking to the boys aunt. It was a twenty hour drive on the way there the old man told the boy that "the man that I killed had a gang it was called the maaaaahb".....(sigh) It was the mob they killed the old man. There the kid was stranded in a car with a dead guy on the driver's seat. The kid moved the guy in the back seat and tried to drive the car first he went backward then he went forward and there was blood all over the windshield the kid put on the windshield wipers and said "I killed 2, guys!" the kid yelled he didn't know how to drive. the car was a Lamborghini so he went as fast as the car could go he got there in 6 hours.

the garbage can seller chapter 3, the Final Fight

They brought the dead guy to the hospital but they took the police car and forgot the car that the dead guy was in so they went back and the car wasn't there so the police man said "the mob took em." It took hours for the police to find the mob's hide out. And when they did find it they peeked in and saw the mob having a feast the police man said "they're eatin em" and the boy said "no they're not stupid he's over there," he was tied to a wood cutter the police man said "it don't matter he's dead," the police man pulled out his walkie-talkie and was guna call the other police men. the boy snatched it away and called in

backup. They got there in an hour and crashed the party some police men got killed and some didn't but they got the mob. And locked them up for 2,240 years without bail or parole.

The End

(Part 2 with a different family)

Once upon a time in Chicago 1947, on the very poor side of town was a little store owned by a man named Joey Wilcox. He lived in a very small house with his wife. That night he dreamed that a bunch of ruthless bandits came and burnt his house down. They were hired by his brother Brian. Joey woke up with sweat all over him he was scared to death. He was so scared that he went everywhere with his wife, even to work. But they didn't care he needed an employee.

Chapter, 2 the funeral

That night they came home and Joey opened the door and BOOM Joey got burned down to bone. When his wife got home she ran to the neighbor's house and called the Fire department and then the cops. When the police and the fire department got there they saw a bunch of guys carrying Joey away in a van.

One week later Elinor wilcox was in the hospital with the doctor's delivering a baby.

25 years later, in 1972 the baby was all grown up. He had a job at the power plant, he worked there for a year but then he remembered what his mom had told him about his dad, then he retired and became a cop. 4 days on the job but then BOOM. 4 days later his funeral was arranged 7 days later his mom got married but they didn't go on a honey moon. that night Joey jr's ghost came back and went into his mother's body and when her husband came home she was talking she said: "I KNOW WHO MY SON'S KILLER IS GO TO THE POLICE AND TELL THEM that," instantly her husband pulled his gun and shot the woman in the head BANG but the woman still was talking the man said im outta here. when he left he threw a match and burnt the house down. the next day the woman was investigated

Chapter 3, Fire place,

The Fire Engines rolled in like 1,000 horses running through the wild west.

One of the fire chief's on the scene was fire investigator Bill Morgan.He pulled up and said, "Okay what's the disturbance," A police officer ran up to him and said "no sir this house was burnt last night and a lady got shot in it. The man that shot her was friends with Henry's brother," "Whose Brother?" "Henry's sir." "Oh Henry's brother, who's henry?" "He was a garbage can seller sir, and he was homeless."

Meanwhile in the alley.

"Come on stupid rrrrh. Help me with this lady." "Uuuuuuuh, God, what does this lady eat."

"Come on it's only a little way to the garbage can then we can split to Saudi Arabia or Iraq we can dress like nuns and join the Iraqi army after that grow a beard and escape then go back to New York and appear on America's Most Wanted."

Chapter 4, the Chase

Once the fire department put out the blaze they sent the police and the detectives, the swat team and the undercover cops the way that the husband and his friend went. They chased them to the middle of china town and then the two friends got on a criminal boat that was just leaving to the middle of the Atlantic Ocean on a very small island with more criminals to kill. Or maybe to kill them.

The End

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